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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000026

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT
DEPARTMENT PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER MOPS CE LTTE

SUBJECT: PM suggests need to amend ceasefire with
Tigers given President's control of Defense portfolio

Refs: (A) Colombo 12, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a January 7 United National Party (UNP) meeting in Panduwasnuwara, roughly 70 miles north of Colombo, the Prime Minister gave a speech suggesting the need to amend the government's ceasefire agreement with the LTTE based on the President's control of the Defense Ministry. Rumors in the local press earlier on January 7 exaggerated the intent of the PM's speech, suggesting the government would walk away from the ceasefire. Several of the contacts that we spoke with on January 7 agreed that concerns over a GSL walkout of the ceasefire were based on misconstrued press reports. The PM's comments on amending the ceasefire, a variant of his earlier theme of "let her take over the negotiations" are a clear sign of frustration. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) PM SUGGESTS AMENDING CEASEFIRE WITH TIGERS: During a January 7 UNP meeting in Panduwasnuwara, roughly 70 miles north of Colombo, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe gave a speech suggesting the need to amend the government's ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) based on President Kumaratunga's control of the Defense Ministry. (Note: The defense portfolio has been under the President since she took control of the defense, interior, and mass communications ministries on November 4.) According to accounts of the speech, the Prime Minister claimed that the government's agreement with the LTTE was based on both sides being in control of its respective forces. Without control of the Defense Ministry, the government could no longer take responsibility for the ceasefire or resume peace negotiations with the Tigers. The PM stressed, however, that it was imperative for the government to remain committed to upholding the ceasefire agreement. He reportedly called on the President to take responsibility for the ceasefire and the peace negotiations with the Tigers, if she intended to remain in control of the three ministries she took over.

¶3. (C) PRESS SPREADS RUMORS: Rumors in the local press on January 7 exaggerated the intent of the Prime Minister's speech, planned for later in the day. Local headlines suggested that the PM would announce the government's withdrawal from the ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It would appear that the PM's prepared speech was leaked to the press, with his planned remarks taken out of context. Further media reports that the government had already informed the four co-chairs (Norway, Japan, US, and EU) of its intent to abrogate the ceasefire were also inaccurate: Mission has had no such communication from the GSL. (Note: As for the Tigers, a late January 7 report on the pro-LTTE website, "TamilNet" carried excerpts of the PM's speech, stating that "there was no immediate reaction from the Tigers.")

¶4. (C) CEASEFIRE CONCERN OVERSTATED: Several of the contacts that we spoke with on January 7 agreed that the concerns over a GSL walkout of the ceasefire were based largely on misconstrued press reports. The Ambassador spoke to Minister Milinda Moragoda (just back from Washington, Oslo, and Brussels), a key GSL figure in the peace process, who stated unequivocally that there were no plans for the GSL to withdraw from the ceasefire accord and that the PM's comments on the matter had been blown wildly out of proportion in the press. Tomas Stangeland, poloff at the Norwegian Embassy, told us that the GSL had not approached Norway, in its role as peace process facilitator, regarding any changes with the ceasefire agreement. Stangeland said that the Norwegians had spoken with Minister G.L. Peiris, another key GSL peace process figure, who also confirmed that the government was not preparing to withdraw from the agreement with the Tigers. Separately, contacts within the Sri Lankan military told us that there had been not

operational change with respect to maintaining the ceasefire.

15. (C) COMMENT: Shortly after the President took control of the three ministeries on November 4, the PM stated that if the President kept the ministries, she should take over the peace negotiations. Today's statement is a variant on that theme. Whatever effect it may have, it seems a clear indication that the PM is growing increasingly impatient with the current situation. END COMMENT.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD